

DJAMBAWA MARAWILI AM

Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*

Djambawa Marawili is one of the great Indigenous leaders from Arnhem Land. Born in 1953, he grew up learning Yolngu knowledge on the ceremonial grounds of northeast Arnhem Land. In the 1960s, he received a Western education at the Numbulwar school and Kormilda College in Darwin. At 19, Marawili helped his father Wakuthi re-establish Baniyala in Blue Mud Bay. After his father's passing, he took on the leadership of the Baniyala homeland and became the cultural caretaker of his clan, the Madarrpa.

Marawili is recognised as a ceremonial authority. He is responsible for transferring the knowledge of Yolngu law and preparing future cultural leaders. For Yolngu Indigenous people, he is the Djirrikay - the equivalent of an Archbishop, Chancellor or Premier for Yolngu clans. Marawili draws on his expertise in Yolngu law and culture to lead across many domains.

Marawili is a political voice for his people. In 1988, he was the youngest Indigenous leader coproducing the Barunga Statement for the then prime minister Bob Hawke. It called for Aboriginal self-management, a national system of land rights, compensation for loss of lands, respect for Aboriginal identity, an end to discrimination and the granting of full civil, economic, social and cultural rights. The following year, Marawili participated in the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody and the formation of The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

Marawili is a forward-looking Indigenous landowner. In 1997, to address illegal fishing on his coastline, he created a polity to document in paint the sacred law of the sea. He faced criticism from peers for revealing secret knowledge. However, Marawili called on senior knowledge holders to stand up for the land and its future custodians. This act of documentation became known as the Saltwater Collection. The paintings were used as evidence in the High Court as 'land claims' to the intertidal zone. Widely known as the Blue Mud Bay case, the decision held that under the 1976 Aboriginal Land Rights Act, the land between high and low watermarks including river mouths and estuaries in the Northern Territory - eighty per cent of the NT coastline - could be claimed and recognised as Aboriginal land.

Marawili is a bilingual diplomat advocating for Indigenous rights on the national stage. His leadership positions include Chairman of the Association of Northern, Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists, a member of the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council, a Board Member of the Australia Council, and a Board member of the Northern Land Council.

Marawili is a diplomat but also an activist for his community. In 2009, after the intervention in the Northern Territory, he publicly opposed the Northern Territory's freeze on homelands funding. He successfully argued homeland communities required services and much-needed infrastructure. To address the needs of his community, Marawili built an independent primary and secondary school and brought small businesses to the community. His guiding principle is that Indigenous people can and should run their own affairs.

Marawili uses art as a tool to benefit his people. In 2010, he became a member of the Order of Australia (AM) for services to Arts administration. But like most Indigenous leaders, his role in the Arts is tied to the holistic responsibility of conserving culture. This requires Marawili to manage organisations in the fields of education, business, law and community well-being, as well as Arts while continuing to practice cultural governance as a senior artist and ceremonial songman.

Marawili believes in the power of higher education. In 2018, he joined with the University of Melbourne's Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation to implement the first accredited university program in Australia designed specifically for Indigenous arts workers from remote communities. His commitment to higher education has resulted in accredited programs that recognise Indigenous conservation practices.

Marawili is a great artist. In 2019, he won the Telstra Art Award at the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards (NATSIAA) a second time for his immense bark painting 'Journey to America', which expresses how Yolngu share philosophy with the world. In the contemporary Indigenous art sector, he is one of Australia's leading mentors. As chairman of one of Australia's most successful Indigenous art centres, Buku Larrnggay Mulka in Yirrkala, Marawili has guided Arnhem Lands artists across many exhibitions and acquisitions by leading collectors and international institutions.

Marawili continues to lead from his homeland of Baniyala. Last year, he established a 10-year Local Decision-Making Agreement with the Northern Territory Government, championing self-determination for the homelands around Blue Mud Bay.

Marawili has made a lasting contribution to Australian culture. However, his deep contribution has never been acknowledged in the sphere of higher education. In 2023, the Faculty of Arts wish to recognise a highly significant Indigenous leader through the award of a Doctor of Letters.